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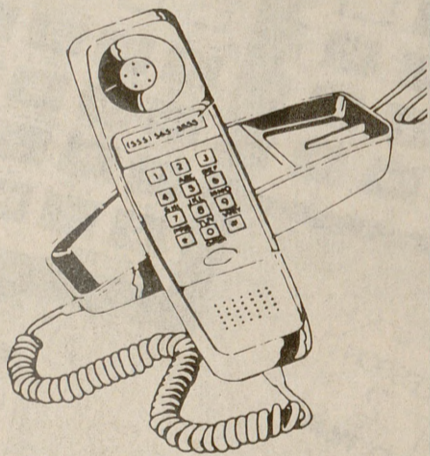
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Fitness centers struggle through weak economy

HOUSTON (AP) — The ailing economy seems to be taking its toll on the country club set, with private clubs finding membership down and trying to cope with new aggressive marketing campaigns.

"If a person wanted to build a country club right now, I'd send him to a head doctor," said Rick Forester, owner-developer of the soon-to-be completed club Cypresswood.

Some Houstonians faced with paying membership fees, monthly dues, greens fees, locker fees and guest fees during economic hard times have decided they can no longer afford club life.

Corporate accounts, once the mainstay for many clubs, have been canceled by some businesses.

Young clubs with young clientele that counted on residential developments in outlying areas for members suffered as the housing market stalled.

Some clubs did not survive the downturn.

Other clubs have tried to cope with it by using more aggressive marketing, discounted memberships and expanding activities to include such sports as basketball and volleyball.

"There's no doubt the economy has hurt the country club business at every level," said Duke Butler, Houston Golf Association executive director.

"What happened was we had all that abundance and now we're back to normal times — although no one wants to think of them as normal. We're talking about reality coming back to us. We don't want to think it's reality, but it is and we have to deal with it."

— Bill O'Connell, president of the men's only-Lochinvar Country Club

"Even River Oaks and Houston Country Club are being impacted," he said.

"It's hurting the overall membership a little and it's hurting the overall traffic and food and beverage business," he said.

"Not as many rounds of golf are being written off as business expenses," he said.

Even those clubs that have retained membership are seeing declines in the food and drink busi-

ness, and fees for tennis courts and the golf course are down.

Braeburn Country Club had lost about 100 members when its board of directors voted to drop its initiation fee from \$15,000 to \$3,750 last December.

Ken Lindsay, immediate past president of the club, said, "There were a lot of people who could afford the monthly dues, but the \$15,000 to join was a stumbling block."

Braeburn was able to fill its 550 membership slots.

Some clubs, however, refuse to discount memberships because they may anger established members who've already paid the membership fee in full.

Bill O'Connell, president of the men's only-Lochinvar Country Club, said the drop in the economy has had "a profound effect on golf."

"If you want to go back to the late '70s or 1980s, everyone in town was playing golf in the afternoons," O'Connell said. "Business was good. They didn't have to sell things. Things were selling themselves."

"What happened was we had that abundance and now we're back to normal times — although no one wants to think of them as normal."

"We're talking about reality coming back to us."

Junk dealer will hang himself to prove escape by outlaw

GIDDINGS (AP) — Junk dealer Woodrow Wilson is going to hang himself on a gallows he and his wife built alongside U.S. 290, but only because it would cost \$100 to hang someone else.

Wilson plans to survive the Sept. 20 hanging.

It's part of his effort to prove that outlaw Bill Longley also survived when he was hanged here in Lee County in 1878.

It is Wilson's hypothesis that Longley paid off the local sheriff, donned a life-saving harness under his clothing and walked out of his coffin shortly after the hanging.

"He headed for Louisiana," he said, pointing to photographs of a grave bearing Longley's name. "I've got proof that he's buried and died down there in Louisiana."

Wilson, 67, pictures a festive celebration complete with entertainment.

The hanging will be the highlight of what he hopes will be the first Bill Longley Day.

Wilson's decision to portray Longley was based on pure economics.

"I had two men that would do it for \$100 apiece," he said.

"But I've put a lot of money in this thing here," he said. "If I can save \$100 I'm going to do it."

The official word is that Longley, a murderer and all-around outlaw, was about 30 when he died by the noose. Wilson, whose grandfather married Longley's sister, claims his no-good uncle died at age 71 from complications after prostate surgery.

The junkman named for the man who was president when he was born said his version of the non-death of Longley is based on local lore and a cousin's research.

"One man that buried the coffin said, 'Let's open up the coffin and see if he's still in there,'" Wilson said. "But the sheriff said, 'The first SOB that opens up that coffin is going to get shot.'"

The hanging re-enactment is touted on a roadside sign near the homemade gallows.

"Bill Longley Hang Out Dedicated to His Memory and Giddings History," the sign says.

"There's some people in town who are not happy about this," Wilson said.

Some people think it's not becom-

ing to the history of Lee County," he said.

"I'm not trying to immortalize him, but this is Lee County history," he said.

"It doesn't show any more relevance than what TV would," he said. "In 10 minutes on TV I've seen 10 killings."

Wilson is working out the final details of his own hanging. He plans to have a "good friend" slip the noose around his neck.

There should be no real danger, he added.

"The only thing is with that slipping up and snapping my neck," he said.

"You've got to allow for that," Wilson said. "It's just a stunt. Within my own life in jeopardy I aim to prove it more than just once."

It's good, clean fun, Wilson claims.

"If anybody gets hurt I'm going to be the one to get hurt," he said with a hint of gallows humor. "I'm putting my neck on that line."

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